



MONTGOMERY COUNTY COUNCIL  
ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

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COUNCILMEMBER  
DISTRICT 1

CHAIRMAN  
TRANSPORTATION, INFRASTRUCTURE  
ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

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Dear Westbard Residents and Neighbors,

I want to take this opportunity to share with you my personal reflections on the concerns that have been raised regarding the future of the Westbard community. It is eminently clear that you care deeply about your community. As do I. I don't just represent you as the District 1 Councilmember -- I know this community well. I drove my children to school on Sangamore Road for 10 years, shopped at the Giant, bowled at what was Strike Bethesda, attended events at Whitman HS where my children attended, my daughter worked at the Little Falls Library, and I have dined in the homes of community members.

Like you, I want what is best for Westbard and for the County as a whole. We may disagree as to what is best, but do know that is my sole motivation. My support for this substantially revised plan is predicated on that conviction. **I believe that the plan our Council tentatively approved (seemingly unanimously) at the Council's last work session will *enhance*, not *degrade*, your community. You will have a much better shopping center; a much better environment, including parks and trees (there are no parks and almost no trees now), better stormwater management, a healthier, aesthetically pleasing stream, a civic space, and more affordable housing that our community desperately needs.**

Much has changed since the plan was first presented to our Council. So much so that it is possible that those who have not lived and breathed this plan for several months may not have caught up. That is one of the reasons I have asked our Council President to make sure that you have ample opportunity to review the plan once all of the changes our Council has made are formalized. And the Council President has agreed.

So, what has changed? Early on, I was among those that thought the plan presented to us by our planners was overly aggressive and could have strained our existing infrastructure, including our schools and roads. That is why, **working with neighborhood association leaders and PTA leaders, I proposed to my colleagues that we reduce the scope of the plan by almost 50%, and my colleagues agreed with me.** No plan in recent memory has been reduced by the Council to this extent. And while our professionals had concluded that our schools and roads could have handled the original plan, by cutting it in half, we can say that now with much more confidence.

What we have approved thus far would result in **approximately 800 more units than what had been approved 30 plus years ago in the 1982 Plan.** Of that number, many will be townhouses,

with the remainder in several multifamily buildings equal or smaller to the existing multifamily buildings on Westbard Ave. I do not view this as an urbanization of the community.

**I recognize, as do my colleagues, that Westbard is not urban and does not seek to become urban. No one is designating the Westbard area as urban.** There is only one reference to urban in the entire plan and that is in the context of using what we have called “urban road code standards” for Westbard and River Road someday. That designation is not something to fear, but rather embraced because those road design standards promote **safer**, more pedestrian friendly community-oriented roads than traditional designs used widely to date. As you know, we have had pedestrian fatalities in this area, and the goal of the urban road code that I sponsored is, in part, to reduce such fatalities. Westbard is not the only decidedly non-urban area to have such a designation - the center of Damascus, Olney Town Center, and Montgomery Hills do too.

*Save Westbard* has suggested that my colleagues and I have been unduly influenced by Equity One and/or developers. I beg to disagree. And I believe the facts show otherwise. The plan that was presented to us by our professional planners would have allowed 1.25 FAR for the revitalized Westwood Shopping Center, far more than what the neighborhood thought was appropriate. I led the fight to reduce it by 40%, and we did. The plan that our planners presented to us would have allowed an Equity One 75 foot, 100 unit multifamily building on the site of the Manor Care facility. I led the fight to reduce it to approximately 35 townhouses at 45 feet, and we did. And the plan that the planners presented to us would have allowed a new Equity One 90 foot building at the site of Westwood II. I led the fight to reduce it to a maximum of 75 feet, and we did. And then we increased Equity One’s obligation to include providing 15% affordable housing, on top of building the new Westbard Avenue realignment, dedication of land for the restoration of the Willet Branch, providing 3 parks and a civic space. All above and beyond the millions in school and transportation impact taxes they will pay.

Developer deference would have led us to either approve or even increase the scale of Equity One’s project, not significantly reduce it as we have. Developer deference would have led us to decrease the “exactions” we expect of developers, not increase it as we have. ***We are not doing this because Equity One wants it. We are doing this because we believe that Equity One’s investment in our community, on this vastly reduced scale, will benefit our community.***

Another important aspect of this plan is increasing the availability of affordable housing. In Westbard today, there are only 43 affordable units. We can and we must do better. We have an affordable housing crisis in our county. This plan makes an appropriate contribution to addressing this moral, social justice issue. The owners of Park Bethesda have pledged that a full 25% of their units will be either moderately priced or work force housing. Equity One is a partner with our Housing Opportunity Commission for additional affordable housing. And we have increased the minimum commitment to moderately-priced housing on all properties from 12.5% to 15%. And this important contribution can be achieved without, in my opinion, changing the character of the community – or contemplating affordable housing on the Little Falls Library site, *which I urged our Council to reject and the Council has done so.*

There has been much discussion of the impact on the local schools in the last year and a half. And my staff and I have been front and center in those discussions. The BCC and Whitman Clusters, like so many school clusters in our county, are struggling to keep up with growing enrollment. In the Whitman Cluster, this dynamic exists even in the absence of new development. The truth is that particularly since the great recession of 2008, MCPS enrollment has continued to increase by approximately 2000 students a year due to a variety of factors: turnover of existing neighborhoods,

migration from private institutions to public schools, families staying put rather than moving further out, and newcomers to the county. With stagnant county revenues, it has been challenging to keep pace with this growth. It is one of the reasons I hosted a widely attended *Infrastructure and Growth Forum* to encourage our county agencies to work together to meet these pressing needs, including the maintenance of a world class public school system that attracted so many of us to Montgomery County. I have been working closely with PTA leaders across the county ever since and our county agencies are working together better.

There is much good news to share on this front for our Bethesda downcounty schools. A second BCC Middle School is under construction to provide much needed relief for Westland Middle School and to finally allow for the movement of all sixth grade students to a middle school setting, thus providing relief to North Chevy Chase ES and Chevy Chase ES. A 34+ room addition is imminent for BCC High School as well. In the Whitman cluster, an eight classroom addition at Wood Acres ES is underway right now, and I am told by the PTA President there that there will be several “surplus” classrooms available when the students and teachers move back into the building. Beyond that additional capacity, MCPS has identified three other elementary schools in the cluster (Bannockburn, Carderock, and Burning Tree) that could receive additions which would create hundreds of new seats. In addition, there are at least two elementary schools in the cluster that could be reopened and renovated if MCPS chooses to go in that direction. **Additions expanding the capacity of both Pyle MS and Whitman HS are already in the works**, and I will be fighting to get those funded on time in this Capital Budget.

There has also been considerable skepticism regarding how MCPS projects future enrollment. And with good reason. Wood Acres is a classic example. However, there has been progress in this regard. Whereas MCPS used to use one projection formula for the entire county, they are now **utilizing a more fine-tuned formula for the southwest school region**, one of five formulas currently being utilized. This was a very important step in the right direction and should produce the most accurate projections possible. In addition, MCPS officials have agreed to use the highest enrollment projections possible in an effort to err on the side of caution when planning for the impacts of the Westbard Sector Plan. Even using these high-end estimates, the **predictions for students to be generated by this plan are as follows: 99 elementary students/43 middle school students/53 high school students**. And these figures assume the entire plan builds out, which is unlikely based on past history. It is also important to remember that these new students will not appear all at once since it will be at least 5-10 years for the new projects in the plan to be completed, assuming they are built. MCPS is confident that they can accommodate these new students without an undue burden on the system.

As noted, pedestrian and bicycle safety continues to be of concern along River Road. This plan calls for a number of **important safety alterations to River Road** and a number of community enhancements such as new streetscaping and elements that would further define the area as a distinct community. Slowing down traffic through the Westbard area, creating a safer environment for pedestrians to cross the street and bicyclists to ride – along with place-making efforts that let pass-through traffic know they are entering a neighborhood – will go a long way to make for a safer Westbard. I proposed language to require a study as to how we can make these improvements in the absence of new development along River Road.

Finally, I have heard many residents ask why any of the proposed residential units are needed. This is a very good question. The answer is, in part, that all **regional forecasts predict that Montgomery County will grow by 70,000 households over the course of the next several decades**. Our County is a desirable place to live. **The question truly is not whether our county will grow, but where?** I am a staunch opponent of sprawl. It degrades our environment and our

quality of life. Our first choice is to maximize our opportunities around metro stations. But obviously not all our housing needs can be accommodated there. So we need to plan for new households close to services, close to transit options and jobs and along our major corridors which has been part of the County's guiding "wedges and corridors plan" since 1962. So again, if we can increase the number of residential units by 800 without degrading the quality of life for the Westbard community, then we are **planning appropriately for the future**. And that is part of our job.

I hope this has provided you with a more comprehensive look at how I, as your District Councilmember, have approached this plan for the Westbard area. Our planners, my colleagues, and many (not all) in the community believe we can do better than what is there today. We think the plan we are poised to approve will provide for a vibrant, sustainable and better future for Westbard's residents today and generations to come. That is our sole responsibility and objective, and I believe we have met it.

I apologize that I am not able to respond to your email in a more personalized manner, but with approximately 2,400 pieces of correspondence to date, that is just not possible. If you have a question or concern that was not addressed in this letter, please feel free to call my office and we would be happy to provide you further information.